

EDWARD DJEREJIAN

# A simple plan for America's Mideast diplomacy

**G**eorge W. Bush wants America to prevail in the struggle between the forces of extremism and moderation. To meet that challenge, US policies must reflect knowledge of the forces at play in the Middle East. Unfortunately, support has slumped for US policies in the region. Yet, there remains a respect and even admiration for some American values: liberty, equality of opportunity and scientific and economic accomplishments. The main problems the region faces include the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq and the need for political and economic reforms. Like it or not, Arabs and most Muslims see America as biased towards Israel, as an occupier not a liberator in Iraq, and as an accomplice of many autocratic regimes in Arab and Muslim countries.

These three challenges are interconnected, although each maintains its own historic and cultural context and must be dealt with concomitantly. It is wrong, therefore, to propose, as some do, that final resolution of the Palestinian issue, for example, can await democratic reform in the Arab world – or that progress on Arab reform should await resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, while these three issues are not, intrinsically, the causes of terrorism, Islamic extremists exploit them fully.

The US must take the lead in galvanising a truly multilateral diplomatic effort to address fully these key challenges at the political, economic, social and cultural levels. The Muslim world is experiencing an ideological struggle between extremists and moderates and the international community has a vital stake in its outcome.

A comprehensive strategy to meet these challenges should encompass, first, action under the aegis of the quartet of Middle East mediators – the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations – along with the Palestinian authorities, to build on the Gaza withdrawal proposed by Ariel Sharon, Israeli prime minister. The principal issue is how to move from

unilateral disengagement to trilateral engagement among the Israelis, the Palestinians and the international community. If properly managed, Mr Sharon's plan offers opportunities that could lead back to direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and realising the two-state vision. Key issues that need to be addressed are economic rehabilitation and development, security and third-party presence and monitoring. A "third party" is essential in achieving progress and, here again, the US must take the lead.

Second, in Iraq, we must not make the quest for perfection the enemy of the good. Saddam Hussein has been deposed and extremists, either secular or religious, must not have the opportunity to fill that void. Serious errors have been made in the approach to postwar Iraq and valuable time has been lost. America's image has been badly tarnished by the prisoner abuse and torture scandal. Given the realities on the ground, the administration is now rightfully tempering the neo-conservatives' democratic ambitions for Iraq by promoting a political transition that features a duly elected consensual government representative of Iraq's diverse population. But without restoration of public security and creation of jobs and economic progress, achievement of political goals will remain tenuous.

Third, the Bush administration has rightly identified political and economic reform in the Middle East as a key objective. However, there has to be a "buy-in" from the countries involved. Reforms cannot be imposed. The values the US stands for are an essential element of this struggle for ideas aimed at the lack of democratic political institutions, independent judiciaries and the rule of law. The absence of such reforms directly affects America's own internal as well as international security, as witnessed by the string of terrorist attacks around the world from September 11, 2001. Along with its allies, especially the Europeans, the US needs to make this a main policy objective and put it on the bilateral agenda with Middle Eastern countries with the clear message that the overall relationship with the US will be affected not only by political, military and commercial ties but also by their action on reforms.

The task is urgent. The US must take an active lead in building international consensus on these issues. The world has a vital stake in the outcome. By co-ordinating US policies and public diplomacy along these lines, the administration can set forth a renewed sense of strategic direction in US policy toward the Arab and Muslim world.

*The writer is director of the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University and chairs the US Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*

The US must take the lead in galvanising a multilateral effort to address challenges at the political, economic, social and cultural levels